



Council's Homeless-services Center Option: Cheaper, Sooner, Bigger

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Guest columnists

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When Mayor Greg Nickels put forward his plan to put \$3.2 million of Seattle's biennial budget into a new downtown homeless-services center last fall, we applauded his compassionate leadership. Now, the Seattle City Council has selected an alternative plan that does the job.

We learned soon after the mayor's proposal that his plan to place the homeless center at a Fourth and Yesler fire-station site, which also serves as the city's emergency-operations center, would cost more than \$500 per square foot, only provide 4,300 square feet of usable space and would open in 2007. We became concerned that the mayor's project is too expensive; would have the capacity to serve too few; and would take too long to begin operations. All this, including the fact that the plan called for housing the center on the same site as city fire and emergency operations, caused us great concern.

We felt a closer look was needed and we initiated a public process to determine whether there was another more cost-effective option.

Two alternatives emerged — and one of them clearly stands out. The Council's Human Services Committee now formally stands behind this alternative.

The Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC) at Third and Yesler is a nonprofit organization with a strong record of providing services to homeless people.

It is a little over a block away from the site in the mayor's proposal.

DESC has put forward a plan that would develop its facility to provide 8,600 square feet of homeless services for \$2.1 million.

That would be more than \$1 million less than the mayor's proposal and it would offer twice the space for services. The DESC plan could also be put into operation as early as January 2006 — that's a full year earlier than the mayor's proposal. In short, we found ourselves looking at a plan that would cost significantly less and serve more people — sooner.

We know the Pioneer Square community has raised some concerns and we feel the city must respond to the businesses and residents of this vital neighborhood. The opportunity the DESC proposal provides — at \$1.1 million in savings — could be used in ways the people of Pioneer Square feel would improve their community.

The funds could help make the DESC option a great benefit to them while assisting people who are homeless.

With the council's proposal, we see a chance to save a great deal of taxpayer dollars — a chance too hard to turn down; an opportunity to provide meaningful services enabling more homeless people to become self-sufficient; and the ability to improve the quality of life in Pioneer Square. We are fully committed to each of these goals.

There are still at least 8,000 homeless people in King County. We must make wise decisions that address their plight, using cost-effective strategies without reducing the quality of life in the community in which they're served, supporting the vitality of our neighborhoods.

The mayor's proposal is sited near the location where we feel it makes the best sense to build a service center. We've paced it out. It took 200 footsteps to get from his site to ours. Those 200 footsteps represent more than a million-dollar difference.

The mayor's heart was in the right place last fall when he put money in the budget to address this crucial issue. We all know that, unfortunately, there are no overnight solutions to homelessness, but we are confident that in the long run, this new proposal for Third and Yesler will make the most difference to the most people with the least possible impact on the neighborhood in which they're served.